

Possible Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse

What follows is a list of potential signs of child sexual abuse or other traumas in children and adolescents. It is important to note that observing one of these signs does not mean that a child has been sexually abused; however, if you see several of these signs you may want to consider seeking professional help.

Physical Indicators: Child sexual abuse does not typically include physical force. It is implied by the size and power difference between an adult/older person and children. Because of this, often there are not physical signs of abuse. However, if you do notice any of these signs, seek medical attention for your child right away.

- swelling, irritation, or bleeding around the genitals, anus or mouth
- frequent urinary tract infections (UTIs) or persistent pain during urination or bowel movement
- sexually transmitted diseases
- pregnancy

Behavioral Indicators: Behavioral indicators of sexual abuse are more common than physical ones, and should be taken seriously if you observe one or more at a time. Note that some of these signs may be indicators of distress from other life changes, such as divorce, moving, or loss of a loved one. If you notice behavioral signs of distress, seek professional help for your child.

- sleep disturbances (e.g. nightmares, bedwetting)
- loss of bladder/bowel control
- sudden change in appetite
- new fears, clinging, not wanting to be left alone
- unusual behavior shift, e.g. from outgoing to withdrawn
- giving up or throwing away a favorite toy, piece of clothing, or possession
- school difficulties, or a sudden immersion in school
- explicit sexual acting out, obsession with sexual parts or words, sexual knowledge in appropriate for their age (see “Age Appropriate Sexual Behaviors”)
- self-harm activities (cutting, burning) or disordered eating
- vague references to an incident (e.g. “I don’t like Mr. Smith anymore”)
- reluctance to go to a particular place or be with a particular person
- leaves “clues” that seem likely to provoke discussion of sexual matters
- writes/draws sexual or frightening images

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- developmental regression, e.g. a child who wets the bed or sucks their thumb after previously outgrowing it
- resists removing clothes, even at appropriate times (bath time, bed time, etc)
- performs sexual behavior with toys, stuffed animals, or younger siblings

Be alert for subtle clues; the symptoms listed may indicate a problem, but they are NOT a confirmation of child sexual abuse

Indicators also can vary with age, type of incident, and length of abuse.

If you are concerned about signs you're seeing in a child, please call our hotline for support. Depending on the nature of the signs, a report may be necessary.